

TESTIMONY BY

Elizabeth G. Flores

Former Mayor

City of Laredo

House International Relations Committee

Subcommittee on International terrorism and Nonproliferation

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Members of the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on International terrorism and Nonproliferation it is indeed my honor to be invited by my good friend, Congressman Silvestre Reyes to be here with you today. It is also great to see my good friends, Congressman Gonzalez and Hinojosa. I welcome all of you today.

When you drive into Laredo on IH 35 you will see a Highway sign that reads, Laredo 65 miles, Nuevo Laredo, 66 miles. As you get closer you will see another, Laredo 25 miles, Nuevo Laredo, 26 miles. And then it hits you, Laredo is Laredo, as in Laredo, Texas USA and Nuevo Laredo is Nuevo Laredo as in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipaus, Mexico. You are approaching an international border. After you check into a hotel, ask for a margarita and a steak, have a good night sleep you wake up in the morning and you realize that a lot of things are different, but mostly everything is the same just as in any other town in the U.S.A. Then you go for a walk and after just a few blocks and a fist full of dollars, you cross into Mexico and things are really different. You have just crossed a place called "The Border". Or to be more exact, "The Southern Border".

The City of Laredo is at the center of the trade routes connecting Canada, the United States and Mexico and is located at **Mile Marker 1** of Interstate Highway 35 (IH-35) also known as the NAFTA highway and the first mile marker of the Purple Heart Highway, **Mile Marker 1** of the I-69 corridor, and **Mile Marker 1** of the new Ports to Plain corridor. Notably, Laredo is recognized as the 4th largest Customs District in the World with cross border shipments totaling over \$90 billion recorded in 2004. Laredo is topped on the list only by the ports of Los Angeles/Long Beach, New York City, and Detroit. As such, Laredo's economy continues to be strongly tied to border trade and transportation and is directly impacted by the continuing ability to move cross border traffic expeditiously.

The success of trade is due to the relationships the citizens of our two communities have and the communication that takes place on a daily basis. Citizens in border communities cross to visit family or friends, attend schools or visit shopping centers. You see our MSA is not totally in the USA. The general concept of a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) is one of a large population nucleus, together with adjacent communities that have a high degree of economic and social integration with that nucleus. Texas border communities' are like other MSAs in Texas; yet we are penalized because the street that divides our communities is not made of asphalt but made of water.

The Rio Grande River as it is known in Washington is the Rio Grande Avenue too many of our citizens. Nuevo Laredo is like your Arlington, VA. Every day people cross the Potomac to do the same things we do, visit family, friends, restaurants and shopping centers. The difference is that when you cross your river you do not congest the bridge with countless regulations. Every day Customs agents process more than 20,000 pedestrians and more than 30,000 vehicles, both Mexican and United States citizens.

What then are the vulnerabilities of this border and what threats do we see. What solutions can we offer? First of all, I agree that we must have a comprehensive action plan that address the years of neglect, secures the border and addresses the immigration laws we now have on the books, but the plan has to be divided into two sections. One section should deal exclusively with reform of our antiquated and useless immigration laws. The other section should deal exclusively with securing our borders against every kind of illegal activity ranging from terrorism to smuggling. The drug dealer was our first terrorist. Yet for years we have turned out back on funding the very agencies that could have strengthen our position and weaken the position of any one wanting to terrorize our residents. The Mexican people that come to work in the United States do not come with the idea of breaking any laws. They are looking for work, for a life that will improve the lives of the families they leave behind. There are complete villages in Mexico without any men and women. Without any dads or moms. Aging grandparents or family members are raising the children. What kind of family life or future will these children have? Will their future be so tied to crossing illegally into the United States that they see nothing beyond that dream? Mexico may be celebrating the money that comes into the country from people working here, but it is not paying attention to the labor drain.

I do not believe that any new immigration policy should necessarily include citizenship or amnesty. Nor does it need to; most Mexican people want to return home. That is why they are sending money home, to build houses and a future in Mexico. This future would be brighter if Mexico had an easier way for people to acquire property. A guest worker program that allows the worker to go back and forth must be the corner stone of any new immigration reform. A guest worker program would relieve pressure caused by illegal entry so that Border Patrol and others can focus on drug traffic and terrorist. We are spreading ourselves too thin. This is a huge border, we cannot build walls or hire enough patrols, but we can be smart about our approach to border security by eliminating one illegal activity. (Wish we could stop the use of the drugs, then we could eliminate another).

U.S. citizens worried that Mexicans are taking jobs that U.S. citizens want and need can be satisfied if the job is first offered to a U.S. citizen. If, after a determined amount of time the job is unfilled, an employer should be able to offer it to a Mexican that has qualified for the guest worker program. I also believe that undocumented workers now in the United States should be given first choice to belong in the program. They have probably already received some training. The issue of reforming our immigration laws is a social and economic issue, both for the U.S. and for Mexico. We are neighbors. We can figure this out.

But I insist that we cannot, we must not let this country think about the undocumented worker in the United States in the same frame of mind as the drug dealer or the terrorist. In recent months it

has been very difficult for border cities to get a clear message across to the Federal Government that will help secure our border. In some cases, the Border has been piled into one large mass that some have called “Little Baghdad”, others a war-zone.

The answers to protecting the border will not rest with physical structures. In a letter to several senators while I was mayor I wrote in part: “As the Senate commences debate over our nation’s immigration policies, the City of Laredo, the nation’s largest port for trade with Mexico strongly supports the efforts of the federal government to enforce the nation’s immigration laws, including the apprehension of persons who have entered the country illegally. The City of Laredo feels, however, the construction of a fence of the nature proposed in the House passed immigration bill would be barren of efficacy but pregnant with insult to our Mexican neighbors, and also to the residents of Texas residing in the Lower and Middle Rio Grande Valleys.”

It seems to me that we have a long way to go to resolve our cross border issues and yet we have a good line of communication by which we can get there. The final approach to immigration reform and securing of our borders should be an initiative that is beyond our borders and our lifetime because a lot of what we will do will be to create long term initiatives that will not be easily effected by political climates or imagined barriers.

The underserved and unattended border that I found when I began as mayor in 1998 did nothing to explain to the American people that we cared about our immigration laws or security of our border. Since that time through advocacy that was level headed, fair and takes into consideration that it is people that patrol the border and simply need good training, enough resources and the best equipment, our Federal agencies have come a long way. Are we finished, no. Did we move quickly enough, no. In fact, sad to say, we would not be getting this attention or would people be asking what we should do, if it were not for September 11th.

In April 2005, the Department of State announced that US citizens would be required to use a passport as the required travel document when entering into the United States from Mexico or Canada at the end of 2007.

This is a huge undertaking that should be part of the comprehensive package, but have enough additional personnel for the Customs and Border Protection Department been hired for this new regulation so that we do not add more congestion to our bridges.

Border communities rely greatly on the economic impact that tourists bring. Jobs. Any challenges for one citizen group brings about delays for all citizen groups. These delays affect the economy of our communities, thus the states and the country’s economy.

Nothing is more important to our two cities than the security of our families and our extended families. I believe that the Border Patrol should get the funding they need to patrol our borders with realistic urgency. By combining forces with local law enforcement agencies that already protect the large areas of population within the border communities we strengthen the effectiveness of the Border Patrol.

But the other side of this coin and the question that should be in everybody's mind is: What is Mexico doing? Remember my reference to the sign along IH35? One mile separates most border cities, yet we are trying to solve immigration and security issues by stopping them from crossing our border, when it would be a much easier task if we worked with Mexico. Mexico can no longer be a silent partner of the United States; working with the US when it likes and refusing to take giant steps towards working with the US on immigration and security of our borders when it should.

Cities cannot be asked to handle cross border traffic yet not given the tools or the federal resources. Border communities have carried the burden of federal regulations and have done it quietly and proudly. Responding to the legislative decisions of two very powerful countries has put a great deal of weight on their shoulders for many years. Now in the mist of more serious security concerns I know just what will play an even more important role in securing our borders. But are we ready to fund those decisions and work through the bureaucratic mess that it will take to get there.

Thank you.